



# DECOY DEBATE

## To Spin or Not To Spin

By Patricia Stockdill

Gadgets and gadgets. Americans are fascinated by the latest and greatest gear, and hunters are no different. Just consider the vast array of camouflage patterns on the market.

But one particular waterfowl gadget, spinning-wing or motion decoys, has drawn the attention of natural resource managers and hunters alike, prompting five states to impose partial or total bans on their use.

Spinning-wing decoys were developed in the Pacific Flyway. First used there in the mid-1990s, hunters across the country and Canada are now adding battery-powered spinning-wing decoys to their gear bags.

For some hunters, such as Brian Fricke of Grand Forks, spinning-wing decoys are a "must-have" item. It may not be the first decoy a waterfowler should get, he said, but

for those hunters looking to complete a spread, spinning decoys could be a good investment. "I've literally seen ducks hang right in behind it," he said. "It's kind of like following the leader type thing."

Those observations are common among spinning-wing decoy users. Only the birds know for sure, but it appears the white flashing of the spinning wing is what makes them so effective, said Mike Johnson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department game management section leader. It may simulate the white underside of a mallard wing.

Johnson echoed Fricke's observations: "I have seen ducks kind of hover over them trying to figure out what it is," he said. In some instances, ducks will actually stack up behind one another, waiting for the decoy to land.

Waterfowlers Erik Myre, Minot, and Chris Hustad, Bismarck, have used spinning-wing decoys for the last three to five years with similar experiences. They feel that their effectiveness may be changing, however.

"They were extremely effective then (when first used)," Myre said. "It was almost too easy."

"In the early days, it's like you pushed that button (remote switch) and it was like it was raining ducks," Hustad said.

Now they are finding that it may be more effective to turn the motion on and off throughout a hunt or even leave it off. "It's an attention getter, not an all-end answer," Hustad said.

Like other decoys, spinning-wing decoys are more effective on some days than others.

Many hunters feel they bring ducks in more consistently than standard decoys on “blue-bird days,” those dreaded waterfowl days of powder blue, cloudless skies.

So far, Game and Fish is taking a “wait and see” approach regarding the use and influence of spinning-wing decoys, said Randy Kreil, Department wildlife division chief. The Department has received little comment – positive or negative – regarding their use, he said, and has no official position on the issue.

There needs to be more definitive information demonstrating their role, good or bad, before making any decisions regarding spinning-wing decoys, Kreil said. “The jury is still out,” he said. The Department has not funded any spinning-wing decoy research, nor is any immediate research in the works.

Some states have conducted hunter surveys regarding their use. A 2000 Louisiana survey found 55 percent of hunters had spinning-wing decoys. A survey the same year in Illinois indicated 61 percent of hunters had them.

States such as Nebraska and California are beginning to conduct studies regarding their effectiveness and a study in Canada has been completed. But so far, there has been little spinning-wing decoy research published, Johnson said.

North Dakota native Mike Szymanski conducted a spinning-wing decoy study as part of his Louisiana State University master’s degree program. Minnesota Department of Natural Resources funded the research because of concerns regarding impacts to local birds and questions of whether or not Minnesota-raised mallards were more susceptible to spinning wing-decoys, said Szymanski, who joined the Game and Fish in August as a migratory game bird biologist.

Minnesota had previous regulations designed to protect juvenile birds reared in the state, Szymanski said. Minnesota has more hunting pressure than North Dakota, which is also true for many Mississippi and Pacific flyway states compared to several Central Flyway states.

The issue of spinning-wing decoys rose to the attention of the Game and Fish Department when Mississippi and Pacific flyway states began discussing their implications – real, perceived and potential. Central Flyway states have discussed the issue, but it is a lesser priority at this time, Kreil said.

Despite their effectiveness, Myre said it appears that birds may be getting used to them. That is one of a multitude of issues many researchers are contemplating when they look at the entire spinning-wing decoy issue. Biologists are hearing reports that they are less effective in southern states, Johnson said, because birds have seen them since hunting seasons began in northern states.

## REGULATING SPINNERS

Five states have spinning-wing decoy regulations: California, Minnesota, Oregon, Pennsylvania and Washington.

Oregon, Pennsylvania and Washington have total bans on their use. Minnesota and California have partial bans where it is illegal to use them during the early portion of the waterfowl season.

Minnesota is in the Mississippi Flyway; California, Oregon and Washington in the Pacific Flyway and Pennsylvania in the Atlantic Flyway.

*A few states don't allow waterfowl hunters to use spinning-wing decoys. North Dakota isn't one of them.*

Photo Omitted.

## SPINNING-WING STUDY

Information from Michael Szymanski's study of spinning-wing decoys in Minnesota. The hunts were conducted throughout the 60-day season in 17 counties.

- 367 hunts were conducted in 17 Minnesota counties to evaluate mallard vulnerability to the use of spinning-wing decoys, placing two decoys in traditional decoy sets.
- One observer was used for each hunt; a total of four observers and four hunts involving 219 hunters.
- Decoys were turned on and then off during alternating 15 minute sampling periods in each hunt.
- Mallards were 2.91 times more likely to respond to decoy sets, flying within 40 meters of the hunters, when the decoy was turned on.
- Flock size coming into the decoys was 1.25 times larger with the decoy on than off.
- Mallards killed per hour per hunter per hunt averaged 4.71 times higher with the decoys turned on.
- Mallards killed per hour per hunter per hunt were similar between the first and second halves of the duck hunting season regardless of the spinning-wing decoy – the decoys were as effective early season as late season.
- Even though kill rates increased with the decoys on, less than 6 percent of the hunters got their daily bag limit of mallards during the hunts.

The study was conducted during the 2002 duck season as part of Szymanski's master's thesis from Louisiana State University School of Renewable Natural Resources.

In states with significant pressure and fewer areas, hunters are using more than one spinning-wing decoy, Johnson said, in order to compete with other hunters. Then it gets to be a question of how many decoys it will take to bring birds in or if even an entire flock of spinners will no longer be able to fool birds.

It seems that juvenile birds could be more vulnerable to spinning-wing decoys, Johnson said.

Game and Fish game wardens Tim Larson, Turtle Lake, and Tim Phalen, Wyndmere, have seen their share of spinning-wing decoys while working the North Dakota waterfowl season. Both have also used them. Their enforcement field observations mirror that of many hunters: Initially, they were quite effective. "Now it's just about like using (standard) decoys," Larson said.

Spinning-wing decoys have changed the traditional decoy setup, Phalen said. In past years, plastic decoys were the norm. Then hunters added one spinning-wing decoy. Now Phalen is seeing fewer standard decoys and increasing numbers of spinning-wing decoys. Many hunters in southeastern North Dakota are not taking any standard decoys when they set up in corn fields, he said, opting for three to six spinning-wing decoys. They seem quite

effective on late season mallards feeding in corn fields.

Both Larson and Phalen feel more nonresident waterfowl hunters tend to use spinning-wing decoys than resident hunters. That is understandable, they said, because hunters coming into North Dakota tend to hunt harder and are well-equipped with more of the latest gear in an effort to get the most out of their stay.

Larson is one of the hunters who feel spinning-wing decoys produce better over water. Others believe they bring in more ducks over field spreads. Although there is little definitive research, it appears spinning-wing decoys could be more effective on dabbling ducks, such as mallards, Johnson said. It also appears that some dabbling duck species could be more susceptible than others.

Spinning-wing decoys may bring birds in closer, Larson said, which could provide better, cleaner kills. They may also help with species and sex identification, Phalen said.

But for Szymanski, one of the surprising aspects of his study indicated that the use of spinning-wing decoys did not decrease wounding rates. Using the same formula in calculating kill and wounding rates of kill (or cripple) per hour per hunter per hunt,

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*Waterfowlers employ their spinning-wing decoys on land and over water. Results, depending on who you talk to, vary.*



Szymanski found wounding and kill rates actually increased with their use.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect for Szymanski was that the study showed proportionately similar numbers of mallards were wounded. That is understandable, he said, given the increased shooting opportunities. "The decoys do work, but they're not a silver bullet," he said.

It's too early to know the long-term influence of spinning-wing decoys, and whether they will increase or redistribute duck harvest to northern states; if their use will continue to increase and, therefore, continue to increase harvest; if the birds will get decoy-wise and avoid setups with spinning decoys; or if it will alter the annual population survival rate of a species.

Some biologists are concerned that duck populations could be hurt because of spinning-wing decoys through increased harvest, changes in the composition of the harvest or harvest of birds in better body condition. If research should indicate this is true, Johnson said it is possible that biologists would have to look at adjusting regulations to reflect their use.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which has the final say in waterfowl seasons and

bag limits, does not have an official, published position regarding spinning-wing decoys.

The question of whether a battery-powered decoy is ethical or not is one that is highly personal, Kreil said. It often depends on if a hunter has a spinning-wing decoy, if a person makes or sells them, or if a hunter is losing out or gaining opportunities to get birds because of them.

It is difficult to regulate ethics, Johnson said.

"I still think it comes down to scouting," Myre said.

At this point, nearly a decade after their invention, the good or bad of spinning-wing decoys remains unknown. It is a complicated issue, Szymanski said. His research was meant to provide information to natural resource managers to help guide them in making decisions. But the information is just one aspect of the issue.

In the meantime, our love for gadgets continues. Look for more hunters to come to the field or water with spinning-wing decoys in hand and the debate to continue.

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**PATRICIA STOCKDILL**, *Garrison, is a freelance outdoor writer.*

## HUNTERS SURVEYED

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources surveyed waterfowlers about spinning-wing decoys.

Some results:

- 10 percent of duck hunters used battery-powered, spinning-wing decoys in 2000.
  - 26 percent used them in 2002.
  - 20 percent of duck hunters said they owned a spinning-wing decoy in 2002.
  - 9 percent of hunters using spinning-wing decoys in 2002 reported them as extremely effective; 29 percent rated them effective; 42 percent said somewhat effective; and 16 percent said slightly effective.
  - 4 percent of hunters using them in 2002 felt they were not effective.
  - Hunters were neutral when asked about implementation of various restrictions if spinning-wing decoys were proven to increase duck harvest, which could result in shorter seasons and/or lower bag limits.
  - Survey respondents were asked to rate their level of support from a list of possible restrictions. Hunters indicated the least support for banning spinning-wing decoy use for an entire season.
  - Banning their use during the first eight days of the season received the most support.
  - Hunters without spinning-wing decoys were more supportive of restrictions than hunters owning spinning-wing decoys.
  - Hunters using spinning-wing decoys reported an average of 16.30 ducks per season and 1.29 ducks per hunting day.
  - Hunters not using spinning-wing decoys reported an average of 7.96 ducks per season and 0.99 ducks per hunting day.
- A Canadian Wildlife Service 2004 report included comments from a Missouri hunter survey:
- 58.2 percent approved the use of spinning-wing decoys only if there was no effect on bag limits or season length.
  - 10 percent opposed their use.
  - 9.5 percent supported their use even if seasons and bag limits were effected.
  - 10.2 percent felt spinning-wing decoys detracted from traditional hunting methods.

*(Sources: Minnesota Department of Natural Resources post-hunting waterfowl survey and Canadian Wildlife Service Waterfowl Committee, 2004 Migratory Game Bird Hunting Regulations in Canada Report No. 12, July 2004.)*

## HIGH-TECH DECOYS

Mojo. Lucky Duck. Robo Duck. And, now, Duk-Like and Roto Duck.

Technology has rapidly changed many aspects of hunting and duck hunting is no exception. What began with one company introducing spinning-wing decoys about 10 years ago has expanded to fill catalog pages, display shelves and Internet pages. Their use has spread from the Pacific Flyway to throughout the United States and parts of Canada.

Waterfowlers wanting to take hunting to an even higher high-tech level can select the Vortex system, a stand system that creates movement with two spinning-wing decoys to simulate multiple ducks coming in for a landing.

Hunters working over water can add floating spinning-wing decoys, complete with a camouflage bladder to keep it sitting above the water. If they opt to go without spinning wings on their motorized sitting decoy, they can use Mojo Wobble, a battery-powered sitting decoy that bobs and wobbles with more action than a standard floating decoy.

But waterfowlers are not alone when it comes to spinning-wing decoys. The market has expanded to include crows, geese and doves.

The simulated movement of a bird appears to attract waterfowl. Hunters have been trying to simulate movement through the use of kite decoys for years. There are also a variety of wind-powered, spinning-wing and jerk-string decoys and jerk systems available to move an entire flock of decoys on the water.

Decoy choices abound. Only time will tell what role spinning-wing decoys will play in the future of waterfowling.